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On Encountering the Difficulty of Reality: Philosophical perspectives on why we respond and why we turn away.

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Abstract

*Whether the treatment of refugees fleeing a war zone on the other side of the world, or that of psychiatric patients closer to home, the Dublin Business School (DBS) conference of 6 September 2019 sought to explore why it is we respond to some human rights abuses and why we turn away from others. It opened a tightly sealed door in our individual and collective psyches, inviting us to turn towards difficulties that we spend so much of our time avoiding or explaining away. This piece seeks to explore why it is we do this; why we struggle with some aspects of reality and how we, as human beings, attempt to manage or out-manoeuvre, those aspects too difficult to comprehend. Drawing on the philosophy of Cora Diamond, particularly as captured in her paper *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy* (2003), this piece attempts to bring some of these philosophical conversations and understandings into the conference's broad and multi-disciplinary exploration of why we respond and why we turn away.*

Keywords: Philosophy; Human rights; Diamond, Cora, 1937–; Difficulties of reality; Deflection

Introduction

In 2003, the American philosopher Cora Diamond published a paper entitled 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy' in which she explored, in a dynamic and performative way, 'the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters'.¹ Diamond drew on illustrative examples from poetry, literature and drama in order to explicate the experience of 'agonising to get one's head around'² aspects of reality too painful, too complex or too overwhelming to even think about. These aspects of reality, and our responses to them, formed the subject of the DBS conference on 6 September 2019.³ Aspects such as human rights and our relations with, and responsibilities towards, our fellow humans and the environment were examined. This piece seeks to explore just three of these aspects, the human right to health, to asylum and to autonomy, and does so in relation to

¹ Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (2003): 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ Dublin Business School, *Why we respond and why we turn away: human rights abuses in a changing world*. Dublin Business School, 6 September 2019.

Diamond's ground-breaking work on the difficulty of reality. What is contained herein is an interpretation, not only of Diamond's positioning, but of the interdisciplinary conversations that swelled in the room that day on the subject of human rights abuses, and why it is we respond and why we turn away.

The Difficulty of Reality

Diamond begins her paper by considering a poem by Ted Hughes, 'Six Young Men'. Allow me to quote from the beginning of her essay:

The speaker in the poem looks at a photo of six smiling young men, seated in a familiar spot. He knows the bank covered with bilberries, the tree and the old wall in the photo; six men in the picture would have heard the valley below them sounding with rushing water, just as it still does. Four decades have faded the photo; it comes from 1914. The men are profoundly, fully alive, one bashfully lowering his eyes, one chewing a piece of grass, one 'is ridiculous with cocky pride' (1.6). Within six months of the picture's having been taken, all six were dead. In the photograph, then, there is thinkable, there is seeable, the death of the men. See it, and see the worst 'flash and rending' of war falling onto these smiles now rotted and gone.⁴

What interests Diamond is 'the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought'.⁵ This effort of trying to get one's head around the idea of something being at once dead and alive offers no intellectual dissonance to some. Diamond describes this when she says 'It is a photo of men who died young, not long after the picture was taken. Where is the contradiction?'. But for many of us, what Hughes offers in his poem is an example of a difficulty of reality: 'experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability'. This difficulty can create an agonising in our minds to which it's often easier to simply 'take things so'.⁶

This idea of taking things so was entertained at the conference by Professor Brendan Kelly⁷ when he explored the human right to health care. Quoting Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he outlined our 'right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being' which includes access to medical care and necessary social services. This is an inalienable right. We take it so. But we also know that many people the world over do not have a standard of living adequate for health and well-being. Millions of people, humans just like us, die each year from illnesses that are easily preventable such as cholera and diphtheria.⁸ Prof. Kelly cited the figure that as many as 75% of people with mental illness in low-income countries do not have access to treatment. Their experience and plight is a reality that our minds are resistant to. It presents a difficulty of reality, not only in our inability to truly know what it is like, but in the vulnerability that lies in the realisation that what separates us as human beings is less substance and more providence.

A second example Diamond draws on in explicating the difficulty of reality is a set of lectures delivered by South African novelist J. M. Coetzee and later published under the title *The Lives of Animals*. The lectures themselves take the form of a story; the story of an elderly

⁴ Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality", pp. 1–2.

⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

⁷ Brendan Kelly, "Is there a human right to health?" (paper presented at "Why we respond and why we turn away: human rights abuses in a changing world", Dublin Business School, Dublin, Ireland 6 September 2019).

⁸ World Health Organisation, *Global Vaccine Action Plan 2011-2020* (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2012).

novelist, Elizabeth Costello, speaking about the horror contained in our treatment of animals: ‘we see her as wounded by this knowledge, this horror, and by the knowledge of how unhaunted others are’.⁹ Parallels with the treatment of Jews during the Holocaust are evoked as Coetzee presents what Diamond describes as ‘a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves’ experienced by Costello as she contemplates how it is we can possibly treat animals in the way we do. The question that Diamond asks is how do we live in the face of a reality that haunts us? She speaks about how we might separate the issue from the haunted woman, resulting in an idea that ‘can then be abstracted and examined’.¹⁰ By this method we might separate the treatment of animals from ourselves and our own lives, ‘the lives of the animals we are’.¹¹ Coetzee’s lectures include arguments on ‘the issue’ but Costello is wounded by the very taken-for-granted mode of thought that how we should treat animals is an ‘ethical issue’: ‘She is someone immensely conscious of the limits of thinking, the limits of understanding, in the face of all that she is painfully aware of’.¹² The fictional Costello, a character who is believed to have enabled Coetzee to distance himself from the intellectual responsibility of his lectures, presents our reliance on ethical or rational argumentation as a way we ‘make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal’.¹³

This tendency to make unavailable to ourselves, to buffer ourselves with rational and ethical arguments, surfaced in the conference presentation of Brian Collins¹⁴ from the Irish Refugee Council. Like Prof. Kelly, Collins outlined our indelible human right to asylum, to protection, but proceeded to explore not only the overwhelming crisis that is forced displacement, but also the ways in which we, as a society, funnel displaced humans through a variety of economic, ethical and legislative argumentation so that the supposed rights of all are ultimately granted to a just a few. While these arguments are comprehensive and defensible, they represent one way in which we ‘deflect’, as Diamond puts it, from our inability to get our head around the experience of, and the realities of an appropriate response to, the sheer scale and horror of human mass displacement.

Deflection

Coetzee, as Diamond sees it, in presenting in his lectures a mode of understanding the kind of animal we are, is also presenting the limits of our modes of understanding. This she pursues in greater detail in the latter half of her paper, and while they won’t be explored in detail here, her efforts are directed at how we might understand a difficulty of reality without making it somehow ‘diminished and distorted’.¹⁵ Diamond proposes that in the very trying to understand the predicament or suffering of another, animal or otherwise, one’s understanding is deflected; ‘the issue becomes deflected as the philosopher thinks or rethinks’. She speaks about the role of language or previous understandings in deflection and describes the notion of deflection as ‘what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity’.¹⁶ Diamond talks about ideas apparently in the vicinity of the issue and how difficult it is for us to even be

⁹ Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality”, p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, p. 7.

¹³ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁴ Brian Collins, “From persecution to protection. An overview of the international protection system in Ireland” (paper presented at “Why we respond and why we turn away: human rights abuses in a changing world”, Dublin Business School, Dublin, Ireland 6 September 2019).

¹⁵ Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality”, p. 11.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 12.

aware that we have been ‘shouldered out of how one thinks’.¹⁷ To illustrate this point, the ways in which when faced with an ‘issue’, a difficulty of reality, we cope, or respond or find ourselves, for a variety of reasons, deflected, I wish to draw on a conversation that unfolded in one of the conference’s discussion groups. The multidisciplinary orientation of conference participants facilitated a thoughtful discussion about one issue raised; that of the rights of a young woman severely ill with anorexia nervosa who had been fed against her will. A discussion ensued about the participant’s experience of bearing witness to this; the difficulty of reality that lay in them being on a side that over-ruled a young woman’s autonomy and subjected her to a bodily treatment which, for her, was as bad as death itself, but which ultimately saved her life. We immediately deflected into a discussion about capacity and decision making, veering into the biological indicators of Body Mass Index and electrolytes, that would allow us to rationalise her incapacity and, consequently, the authority of her medical team to enact legislation designed to protect human life itself. This particular issue is a quagmire but it offers an example of how readily, through a variety of ethical, rational and intellectual mechanisms, we find ourselves ‘apparently in the vicinity’ of the original issue. We have been shouldered out of the original issue, an issue almost too difficult to summarise for in the very summarising, in word and in thought, we find ourselves shouldered out from even the inability of our thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach.

Conclusion

Difficulties of reality as Diamond sees them are difficult in their ‘not being fittable with the world as one understands it’.¹⁸ Whether the difficulty of reality presented by the incomprehensibility of what it is like to watch a loved one die from an illness that is entirely preventable; or to find oneself abandoned in a liminal space between conflict and asylum desperately searching for safety; or even to have one’s body and autonomy overruled and subjected to the will of others in the name of care; our lives are endlessly bombarded with human rights difficulties towards which we choose to respond or to turn away. What Diamond offers, in my opinion, are the intellectual apparatus and linguistic metaphors we require in order to even see, if not begin to comprehend, the incomprehensible. To notice oneself ‘shouldered out’ of thought by legislation, argumentation or ‘expertise’ and recognise that not only is this to be expected, but perfectly understandable. An underlying current throughout the conference was the sense of ‘of course we don’t think about these difficulties’. Of course we turn away in a great many instances. Difficulties of reality are just that, difficult. We are human and limited in our thinking. What Diamond offers, as I see it, is a way of turning towards, becoming aware of and acknowledging the limits of our thinking. She highlights the ways in which we attempt to numb, deflect or shoulder out these difficulties and, importantly, offers a sense of compassion for our doing so. We are, after all, human.

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 14.

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